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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/16/2016
TAGS: [ELAB](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [ETRD](#) [CO](#)
SUBJECT: VIOLENCE AGAINST TRADE UNIONISTS CONTINUES
DOWNWARD TREND

REF: BOGOTA 2222

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Milton K. Drucker
Reasons: 1.4(b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Violence against trade unionists has diminished significantly, but it remains a problem. Labor leaders now express greater concern with alleged violations of worker's rights, such as the right to organize and collectively bargain, than with violence against workers. So far, Colombian organized labor has not said it would use labor violence as an argument against the FTA. End Summary.

DECLINE IN UNIONIST MURDER RATE EXCEEDS NATIONAL AVERAGE

¶2. (SBU) Violence against trade unionists has diminished significantly. According to the Ministry of Social Protection (MSP), a total of 14 trade unionist were murdered in 2005, a 66 percent reduction from 42 homicides in 2004. The National Labor School (ENS), the primary NGO that tracks Colombian labor data, reported that 70 trade unionists were killed in 2005, down from 94 in 2004, a reduction of 25 percent. These declines exceed the 10 percent national reduction of homicides, from 20,210 in 2004 to 18,099 in ¶2005. There are about 900,000 unionized workers nationwide.

SOME DISPUTE NUMBERS, NONE DISPUTE DECLINE

¶3. (C) Government of Colombia (GOC) officials and labor leaders often dispute the number of trade unionist murders because the ENS factors into their calculations homicides of teachers (both unionized and non-unionized), retired union workers, and nonunion affiliated legal advisers to labor groups, whereas the MSP does not. MSP human rights director Gloria Gaviria told Laboff that using such a broad criteria inflates the number for "political reasons - to hurt Colombia overseas and gain international NGO support." ENS coordinator of human rights Juan Rosado, on the other hand, argued, "No one can deny that murders against unionists are down, but the reduction is artificially exaggerated by the MSP," explaining that the MSP does not count unionized agricultural workers as unionists and that factoring teachers is important because they are often killed in the course of

their work. Rosado also pointed out that the MSP requires a union to certify its affiliation with a homicide victim, a measure that can result in under-counting if a union does not take the initiative to contact the MSP. Gaviria said in January the MSP and Vice President's office invited the ENS and the United Confederation of Workers (CUT) to discuss ways to agree on criteria for calculating homicides, but the invitation was declined.

NO DISTINCTION MADE FOR HOMICIDE MOTIVES

¶4. (C) Neither the MSP nor the ENS reports whether a murder was specifically related to union activities in calculating its respective figures. Gaviria pointed out that violence has traditionally penetrated all sectors of Colombian society, and many of the trade unionist murders counted by the MSP were not related to labor activities. The President of the Federation of Colombian Educators (FECODE), Colombia's largest union with 280,000 teachers, told Laboff, "About one in ten of teachers killed are due to union or political activities." The MSP indicates that 26 unionized teachers were killed in 2005, down from 47 in 2004.

THEORIES ON HOMICIDE REDUCTIONS

¶5. (SBU) There are various theories behind the reasons for the decline in homicides. The GOC asserts that the reduction is primarily due to President Uribe's "Democratic Security" policy and increased funding of the Ministry of Interior's

protection program, partly financed by the United States, which protects threatened labor leaders. Organized labor has argued, however, that the reduction in violence is due to the paramilitary demobilization process, which has disarmed approximately 26,000 of the illegal actors. Other labor leaders attribute the reduction in violence to the fact that organized labor has become so institutionally weakened that unions no longer pose a threat to interests that historically targeted them.

OTHER VIOLENCE INDICATORS DOWN

¶6. (C) Virtually all violence-related data compiled by the ENS demonstrates significant reductions: general threats against trade unionists are down from 445 in 2004 to 260 in 2005, forced displacements are down from 33 to 8, and arbitrary detentions are down from 77 to 56. The MSP only collects data on trade unionist homicides, but Gaviria informed Laboff that the Ministry would begin collecting and monitoring threat data this year.

LABOR'S CONCERNS AND THE FTA: VIOLENCE NOT THE MAIN ISSUE?

¶7. (SBU) Although organized labor is unified in its opposition to the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), leaders from the three labor confederations are more concerned with how the agreement will impact the economy and employment (reftel), rather than focusing on violence to oppose the accord. They are worried that the FTA will further weaken worker's rights, alleging systemic violations against the right of organizing and collective bargaining, such as "irregular" contracting practices, a pro-business government that interprets laws against labor, and a culture of distrust of unions.

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